

Family and Children Services Committee  
June 8, 2005

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Committee about the Family to Family Model in Michigan. My name is Dan Cowan and currently I provide training and consultation for Family to Family throughout the state. Prior to this, I worked in several private agencies, including Orchard's Children's Services, Catholic Social Services and others in family prevention, preservation, clinical services and administration. I understand that this committee has heard testimony about the Family to Family practice model from others, including Deputy Director Gonzales. The committee understands that F2F is not a program, nor a fad, nor a panacea, but rather a structure for public and private child placement agencies to enhance their practices so we are better able to serve the families and children that come to our attention, and help them achieve better outcomes.

This model is a reform effort that in very concrete ways allows agencies to put their values of public service into action on a daily basis. You will hear from private agency partners, community partners, foster parents, birth parents and youth about how the changes that are being implemented under the umbrella of Family to Family have effected them, their staff and the children and families they work with. Through the testimony of these partners, we hope to separate the facts from the myth about Family to Family and provide the committee with a more thorough understanding of the changes that are occurring in our sites.

I want to share with you some of what F2F means in practical and real ways for children, youth, families and agencies.

- We have changed our practice by going into communities that we once thought of as beyond hope. We have formed relationships with individual community leaders, grassroots organizations and faith-based organizations in the communities to help us support families and recruit foster parents from the neighborhoods so children can stay connected with their schools and churches. We have partnered with organizations and individuals to have activities for our families and give us input about our policies and the services we provide in their communities.
- Through Family to Family, we have engaged with relative caregivers and foster parents in ways that we traditionally avoided. We have asked these resource parents to help us make the decisions in partnership with the families. We have asked our foster parents to meet the birth parents shortly after the children are removed so that the birth parents know a loving family is caring for their child. Our resource parents are willing to offer guidance and assistance to the families even after the children return home, or offer a permanent connection to youth if they are unable to return home.

- We now give families and youth a real opportunity to hear from us when we have to make the most difficult decisions about a family staying together. More importantly, we give families and their extended family members the chance to be heard and give us ideas about what they need. And we treat families with the respect and dignity they deserve.
- Our older youth have organized foster parent appreciation dinners so they have a chance to say thank you to the families that gave them a loving home

The changes that are a part of this model are not necessarily radical, but change is typically difficult and challenging when we are used to doing things a certain way. As child welfare professionals in both public and private agencies, we must evolve as child welfare services always has when we learn that there is more we can do. We should not settle for anything less for our children in care than we would for our own biological children. When the state and the courts make the difficult decision to remove children from their parents, whether temporarily or permanently, we have taken on the responsibility to parent these children and provide them with what they need to grow into adulthood. I have two boys that I have no intention of having them "age out" of my home and family when they turn eighteen. Yet, that is exactly what we call it when an eighteen or nineteen year old who does not have a permanent family must leave the child welfare system. You have received a copy of the Chapin Hall Executive Summary of the "Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth". This discussion paper paints a very clear picture of some of the outcomes our children face as they become adults. We must no longer settle for good enough. By changing our practices so we will have better outcomes, Family to Family allows agencies and staff to engage and involve families, youth and our partners in doing what is right for all our children.

Thank you,  
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